

LONGING FOR HOME

by John Heaton, Headmaster

I have lived in Virginia for twenty five years, in the same house, a dwelling I have lived in longer than any other in my life. Virginia is my adopted home state and I doubt that I will ever leave. The truth be told, however, is that over the years I had many occasions to visit my home in Florida, landing at Orlando International Airport, literally flying over my childhood neighborhood on final approach. As often as I could arrange it, I would rent a car, and quickly drive first to the old house, which was only about five miles from Orlando International Airport. I would point the car down Condel Drive and slowly idle past each house. I knew who had lived in each one years before. There was the small lake, the Bakewell's, the Wilson's, the Clark's, Nanna's, and, of course, the Neiperts! (ask your children who have been in my chapels about them).

Everything was the same; everything was different. Some of the houses had been upgraded; some were remarkably unchanged. The old owners had passed away or moved. New children played in the front yards. Waves of nostalgia would wash over me. There is where my brother and I built forts. There is where Michael Watson snagged my head with a fishhook. There is the window that Ricky Neipert broke, lobbing an orange through it during a fight.

Memories that had faded to black and white vividly returned in full color. That, of course, was the whole point of going in the first place. One can wistfully think about home, but actually returning to the place compounds the intensity of the nostalgia. Driving around the block I would increase the scope of the tour, taking in the next street and the next, and the memories would continue to roll even from places which I had frequented less, but which were still part of my larger childhood awareness.

Human beings have a strange capacity for nostalgia, that feeling of wholeness which is achieved by going home, especially after a very long absence. We long for that sense of peace engendered by the familiar. Not only do we want to go home, but we

also want to experience the longing for home. At the deepest level, the two are indistinguishable. We want to go back.

The ancients understood this sensation, too. Reaching across the centuries, we can read Homer's epic poems from the 8th century BC and find characters who experienced the exact same thing, the longing for homecoming. We see it in the Iliad, but especially in the Odyssey. It is so prominent the Greeks had a name for it – nostos (nostoß). This word describes the intense longing for home and hearth, for family and community, and for the grounding a soul achieves when a person returns to a specific place. "Nostos" is the word from which we get our English word, "nostalgia," but it does not suggest a shallow or undeveloped emotion. It describes that very powerful impulse at the core of our being to reclaim the past, roll it forward, and return it to a never-ending present. This, by the way, is nearly identical to the Christian vision of eternal life in which all of our past is gathered up with nothing lost, and returned to eternal stability.

Odysseus, the clever and mighty warrior and one of the heroes at Troy, spent ten years fighting the war. At its conclusion he set out for home, but little did he know that it would take another decade to reach Ithaca, and his wife Penelope. His journey was delayed for seven years while he was held captive on the island of Calypso, by a goddess who offered him immortality and all the pleasures he could imagine. Day after day, however, Odysseus sat on the rocks overlooking the wine-dark sea, longing for home, longing for Penelope, longing for his son, and for his farm. Nostos was so powerful it led him to reject Circe's offerings.

The gods intervened and Odysseus was released, but his route to Ithaca was by no means direct. He was tossed from one adventure to the next, encountering giants, Charybdis and Scylla, the Sirens, the Cyclops – on and on – even sailing within sight of Ithaca, but missing port. Odysseus was a warrior, a sacker of cities, and before he could go home to assume his kingdom and the rule of men, he himself would have

to be a changed man. He would have to remain courageous, but shed recklessness; he would have to abandon reliance on clever tricks, and become truly wise; he would have to be not only an aggressor, but also a protector and provider. Nostos drove him homeward. But when he finally arrived he discovered that everything was the same; and everything was different, too. Having lost all of his ships and all of his men, he was a changed man. Ithaca had changed, too.

We read and enjoy the epics at New Covenant because they validate our humanity. We read the ancient poems, to find that these people who were very different from us, are remarkably the same. They experience the same human struggles, emotions, desires, and aspirations. When we see ourselves in their narratives, it validates our humanity and helps us know that we are not uniquely different.

And that brings me round to us. After 32 years New Covenant has hundreds of grads and former students. The rapid growth of the school in that time period has meant that early graduates had one kind of New Covenant experience, and later graduates had an entirely different experience. There have always been constants in our curriculum – Latin, the history time line, Spalding phonics, logic, rhetoric, and, the senior thesis. Our campus and programming, however, have changed dramatically. I hope you'll read this edition of Quid Novi to discover our expanded classrooms (see Jessica Arango's article on the Epic Hallway!), and expanded programming (see Scott McCurley's article on J-terms!)

Finally, to all those Gryphons out there, we hope you are experience your own "nostos" in regard to your alma mater. We hope you make your plans for the annual "homecoming" welcome in just a few short weeks. Come back home for a short visit. Who knows? I'm sure you've changed. I can assure that New Covenant has also changed. In either case, we trust that you are a better person for it, and that we are a better school.